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THE SIN OF DAVID

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THE SIN OF DAVID

BY

STEPHEN PHILLIPS
AUTHOR OF "ULYSSES," ETC.

WITHDRAWN

9082

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ACT I

CHARACTERS

SIR HUBERT LISLE,	*Commander of the Parliamentary forces in the Fenland.*
HUBERT,	*The child of Lisle and Miriam in Act III.*
COLONEL MARDYKE,	*Of the Parliamentary army, owner of Rushland, the headquarters of the army.*
COTTON, FINCH, MARSH, CRABLOVE, IRON,	*Officers of the Parliamentary army.*
JOYCE,	*A lieutenant.*
A DOCTOR.	
RATCLIFFE,	*Servant of Mardyke; afterward of Lisle.*
MIRIAM,	*Wife of Mardyke; afterward of Lisle.*
MARTHA,	*Sister of Mardyke.*

OFFICERS, NURSES, SOLDIERS, *etc.*

The period of the play is that of the English Civil War between Charles I and the Parliament.

9082

THE SIN OF DAVID

ACT I

TIME. — *Summer of* 1643, *the first year of the war: noontide.*

SCENE. — *Hall of Rushland House, the headquarters of the Puritan army in the Fenlands. On the left a flight of steps leading up to a turret-chamber. A door on either side, on the right communicating outward, on the left inward. At the back, a door flanked by recessed windows opens on a terrace beyond, with foliage of poplars and*

alders, and a distant view of the Fens. Various military officers are standing in silence, with bowed heads and folded hands, as in prayer, around a table covered with papers. MARDYKE *stands at the head of the table.*

MARDYKE. [*After a pause.*] Now, sirs, that we have sought the Lord in prayer,
Each one in silence, will we hear and judge,
Knowing ourselves His mortal instruments.
All we with clean hearts unto judgment come;
Yet in Thy sight no human heart is clean;
And if we punish others, we ourselves

Are ready to abide Thy punishment.

[*They slowly seat themselves.*

Read, Captain! Who is charged with mutiny,

With plunder or with harryings or with flame,

Making God's army of the Fenland mocked,

A hissing and abomination, yea,

A laughter sweet unto the Philistine,

And all our fire, our kindling, and our zeal,

As ashes fallen, and as the greyness of ashes?

Read!

COTTON. [*Rising with papers in his hand.*]

There is nothing here of mutiny,

Nor here is any charged with drunken rage,

With plunder or with harryings or with flame,
To make God's army of the Fenland mocked.
But one among us is of carnal crime
Loudly accused: 'tis charged against him here
That he by violence hath a maid undone.

[*Murmurs.*

His name Lieutenant Joyce: who on this cry
Arrested and close-guarded waits without.

FINCH. Is this already public in men's mouths,
So noised we cannot overpass it, sir?
If not, 'twere well to mingle policy

With zeal, and hush it for the larger good.

MARSH. Publish it not, lest we be pointed at.

Such is our cause a little smirch undoes it,

By its own virtue the more vulnerable:

Greatness hath often by a whisper crashed.

COTTON. The thing is public and the wayside talk;

The clucking housewife hath it, and the crone

Mumbles it sitting half-out in the sun.

MARDYKE. Public or no, I palter not with heaven.

The sin is sinned; and if we punish not,

Then stand we here partakers of the sin.

CRABLOVE. Doth Joyce deny this? Let us hear him speak.

[MARDYKE *motions to bring in* JOYCE.

COTTON. Freely he hath confessed and bides the issue.

Enter JOYCE, *guarded*

MARDYKE. Lieutenant, publicly you stand accused
Of a young maid's enforcement: what say you
In answer?

JOYCE. I make answer, "It is true."

MARDYKE. None here can come between thee and thy God.
Yet in mid-madness didst thou not recall
That thou wert more than Joyce: an officer

In this our righteous warring; that you brought
This holy host into derision? Speak.

JOYCE. Her face was close to me, and dimmed the world.
Yet have I fought, and in the front of all.
Shall one mad moment all those hours outweigh?
Who being human is for ever sure?

MARDYKE. [*Rising.*] God needs not thy polluted arm henceforth.
He asks not Captain, no, nor man-at-arms
Of heart unclean: thou shalt not fight for Him.
Take him away! thy punishment with us.

[*Exit* JOYCE, *guarded.*

Now, sirs, he hath confessed, his sentence lies
With us.

FINCH. You, sir, who fought with English Vere
At Heidelberg, at Mannheim and Ostend,
Where'er the persecuted faithful fell,
Whose fame still clings about the vines of France,
How dealt ye in those camps with carnal crime?

MARDYKE. Our cause, as now, required our spotlessness,
And we on grave occasion visited
Such sin with death!

Enter RATCLIFFE, *with letter*

RATCLIFFE. A letter, sir, post-haste.

MARDYKE. [*After glancing at letter.*] Summon your mistress and my sister here.

[*Exit* RATCLIFFE.

This letter, sirs, concerns us all — I'll read.

"I, Sir Hubert Lisle, being appointed by the Parliament to the command of their levies in the Fenland, where, as I hear, there is much need of enkindling, do propose, by your leave, to make Rushland House my headquarters. I know that your zeal will not refuse me this if it be any way possible; but I pray you excuse me to your lady for so sudden demand on her

kindness. I follow hard on this letter, and am minded to stir up such a fire in this region as shall not easily be put out.

"HUBERT LISLE."

[*Animated murmurs.*

Sirs, with my wife I must have speech forthwith,
And make such preparation as I may.

[*The officers retire in eager discussion on to the terrace at back, and from time to time they are visible conversing together during the scene which follows. Meanwhile* MIRIAM *and* MARTHA *enter.* MIRIAM *stands submissively before* MARDYKE, *who, intent*

on letter, does not observe her for a moment.

Mistress, you must prepare, and instantly,
For entertainment of Sir Hubert Lisle,
Sent hither to command our Fenland host.
Learn then what manner of man is he who comes;
One sprung to arms from England's chivalry,
Despising lure of courtier or of priest,
To fight the fight of freedom and of God:
In foreign battle nursed, yet not as we,
Stricken and bowed, but in his flush of strength;
Quickly provide, then! Stand thou by his chair

And bring with thine own hands the cup
of welcome:
See he lack nought thou canst bestow.
But hither! [*She turns to go.*
Miriam! heed well that you displease him not
By silly gaud on bosom or in hair,
Lest he account thee light, a daughter of
Gath.
I'll strip this chain from thee; these
wanton beads,
Meshes of Satan, grind I into dust.
[*He snatches chain roughly from her
and tramples it under foot.*
You, Martha, with a graver thought assist
My wife. Receive this guest as from the
Lord! [*Exit* MARDYKE.

MIRIAM. [*Trembling.*] Am I not as that chain, trod underfoot,
Chidden and checked even more than when a child?

MARTHA. My brother sternly broods, but loves you still.

MIRIAM. Why, Martha, why could I not ever stay
His daughter? So my dying father left me,
When side by side they fought at La Rochelle;
And as his daughter grew I up submiss;
Why must he then make me his wife?

MARTHA. Perchance
To shelter you, and comfort his grey heart.

MIRIAM. I am no wife to him; and the waked woman
Within me cries against the yoke and loathes it.

MARTHA. Why to so loathed a marriage did you yield?

MIRIAM. How could my orphanhood withstand his will?
Did I not owe him all, refuge and bread,
And sheltering sustenance? Could I take all,
And then refuse that petty price "myself,"
Sole price which he who gave so much required?
Well I have paid to the full! He starves my soul,

He locks my spirit up and keeps the key.

MARTHA. Say not there is some other —

MIRIAM. No one. No.

My misery is faithful to him.

MARTHA. Child,

What is't you sigh for, whither would you fly?

I cannot understand.

MIRIAM. Nor I myself;

And 'tis the very blindness of this beating

That makes of me a creature so unhappy,

And unto thee a plague.

MARTHA. Never, my child.

MIRIAM. O thou dear Martha, living without sin,

And reputably rusting to the grave,
Thou vacant house moated about by peace,
Thou shadow perfect, and thou blameless ghost,
I cannot feed my soul on "Thou shalt not."
I'll fight 'gainst numbness, wrestle against rust.
There's the arch-foe of women! this doth kill us.
Not pain, nor secret arrow of the midnight
That quivers till the bird-song, ended faith,
Mortal surprise of marriage, nor the dawn

Of golden-vista'd children clouded quite,
Nor fallen loneliness where love hath been.
These, these are understood, wept o'er and sung.
But worse, ah, worse the folding of the hands,
The human face left by the tide of life,
The worm already at the human heart.

MARTHA. Sooner the worm than guilt within the heart.

MIRIAM. No! I would rather drench my soul in sin
So I might feel this fire and grip this glory,
The colour and the bloom and the music of life!

MARTHA. Miriam! no more I'll listen to you. Know

That He who gave us life ordained us law.

MIRIAM. Law! And is law then but to bind and freeze?

By law the lightning spurts, and the earth quakes,

And the spring surges thro' a million buds;

And law is filled with rushings and with thunder.

MARTHA. You must endure. Thy ancestors and mine

Went for their faith to torment and to fire.

MIRIAM. Ah, for their faith! I hope my blood is theirs,

And I would splash the flames about my
head
Gladly as in a bath for splendid death,
But for this life no life I was not born.

MARTHA. When there shall come a
child —

MIRIAM. Ah, speak it not!
A child of him! I sicken, I quake at it;
My very flesh doth shiver. Think you I
Could squander upon any child of him
The brooding balm and wistful riches, all
The holy longing that on summer evens
Arises homeless in my silent heart?
Babes that we love, we must have loved
ere birth.

[RATCLIFFE *enters behind and beckons to*

the officers outside. As he passes MIRIAM, *he picks up chain and gives it her. She gives him her hand, which he kisses. She smiles sadly on him. He goes out.*

MARTHA. See, they return. Come, then. Give me the keys!

MIRIAM. Ah! might this tumult find at last a goal!

[*Exeunt* MARTHA *and* MIRIAM.

Reënter slowly military officers, who seat themselves at the table. Lastly enter MARDYKE. *He sits at the head*

MARDYKE. Do Thou, O Lord, direct aright our minds,

And our decision be unto Thy glory!

Your judgment, sirs, upon Lieutenant Joyce!

Shall we but cast him from us as unclean?

Or shall we punish carnal crime with death?

FINCH. Purge we our army of the sinner; yet

See we deter not by too fierce a doom

Others that waver still from taking sword.

IRON. If outrage be not punished the whole land

Rising in wrath against us will take sword.

COTTON. My voice also for death; when war begins,

Mercy at first is cruelty at last.

MARSH. Break him, but leave him leisure to repent.

CRABLOVE. Enough we cast him straightway from among us.

MARDYKE. For death my voice; else every one of us

Will into holy battle go unclean.

FINCH. [*Rising.*] The vote is even!

MARSH. What shall now decide?

[*Trumpet heard.*

Enter RATCLIFFE, *hurriedly*

RATCLIFFE. Sir Hubert Lisle, sir, ridden furiously.

MARDYKE. [*Rising.*] Lisle, our commander: his the casting vote.

[*They all rise.*

FINCH. On him alone the burden and the issue.

Enter LISLE, *spurred, and spattered with mud.* MARDYKE *advancing,* LISLE *takes him by the hand, and they stand looking at each other for an instant*

LISLE. God save you, sirs, what business of the camp
Presses; what labour from the Lord awaits me?

MARDYKE. [*Motioning* LISLE *to head of table.*] This on the instant then: Lieutenant Joyce,
Of this God's army, charged with carnal crime
In that he hath enforced the innocent
And brought a young maid into public shame.

This he denies not. Now three voices here
Cry that we purge this holy host of him,
So satisfied; and three that he shall die.
With thee the casting vote. The Lord speak through thee.

LISLE. [*Rising.*] Sirs, in no common quarrel are we up,
Nor to a slight fray have we girded us,
But are embattled for dear liberty,
Dear liberty to righteousness affianced,
That each man on our English soil henceforth
Shall live his own life out beneath the sun,
Master of his own conscience, his own soul,

And answerable only to his God:
For this and no less thing rise we in arms.
For this the noble hath disdained his ease,
For this the gentleman forsworn his hearth,
For this the yeoman left his glebe unploughed,
For this doth brother clash with brother, friend
With friend, and father smiteth his own son:
For this have we preferred, rather than reap
A servile tilth, to trample the sown field
And springing pasture to incarnadine.
But vain the father's and the brother's blood,

Pasture ensanguined and abandoned hearth,
And worse than vain our liberty at last,
If we have builded it with hands defiled.

[*Murmurs of admiration.*

Therefore I show no mercy on this man.
Death! Let him die.

MARDYKE. Bring in Lieutenant Joyce.

Enter JOYCE, *guarded*

LISLE. Lieutenant, for the sake of that high cause
For which we are embattled, and which thou
Hast stained, I sentence thee forthwith to death.

JOYCE. Death!

LISLE. To a soldier 'tis a little thing.

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JOYCE. I do not count death as a little thing.

I cannot go out of the warm sunshine
Easily; yet I am a gentleman
And I can die.

LISLE. Hast anything to say?

JOYCE. Thou who so lightly dealest death to me,
Be thou then very sure of thine own soul!

LISLE. I fear not that; and less do I fear death.

[LISLE *dismisses* JOYCE *and guards.*

[*Drawing his sword.*] And judge me, Thou that sittest in Thy heaven,
As I have shown no mercy, show me none!

Deal Thou to me what I have dealt to him.
Nay, more; not the mere death that he
shall die,
Strike at the heart, the hope, the home
of me,
If ever a woman's beauty shall ensnare
My soul unto such sin as he hath sinned.

[MIRIAM *has entered with wine and stands waiting.* LISLE, *lowering his sword, sees her before him and stands motionless.*

MARDYKE. Sir Hubert Lisle, my wife!
To her I leave you.

[*Exit* MARDYKE *and others.* MIRIAM *pours out wine and proffers* LISLE *the cup.*

LISLE. [*Taking cup.*] Lady, I thank
you, and must ask your pardon
For breaking in on you so suddenly
And so disordered — I would say — but you,
You are not of our country?

MIRIAM. No, of France,
And I was born in the sun's lap — will
you
Not rest awhile?

[*She moves as if to conduct him.*

LISLE. [*Hesitating.*] You are then of
that land
Where flows the crimson wine that now I
drink?
Is't not so?

MIRIAM. Even so.

LISLE. [*Holding up the wine.*] And in such glory
Have you fared hither to us over sea.

MIRIAM. Will you not rest? [*Again moving.*]

LISLE. [*Going, then again hesitating.*] I thank you.

MIRIAM. See — this way.

LISLE. And you — how long since is it that you left
Your southern vines?

MIRIAM. I came here as a child;
My father died at La Rochelle.

LISLE. Alas!

MIRIAM. Committing me to Colonel Mardyke's care,

Who was his comrade then.

LISLE. And who is now
Your husband?

MIRIAM. Yes. Your room, sir,
eastward lies.

LISLE. I will come with you — and
these glimmering fens,
Do they not pall after the southern glow?

MIRIAM. I am grown used to them.

LISLE. And yet it seems
Strange in the drear fenland to light on
you.

MIRIAM. How still the air is: scarcely
can one breathe.
A storm approaches — [*Hesitating.*] Will
this war soon end?

LISLE. Not till we triumph — or —
darker it grows.
This leads us to the garden? See how
still
That poplar, conscious of some heavy
fate!
That breathless alder! Like to guilty
souls
Against a coming judgment.

MIRIAM. [*Hesitating.*] Is there aught
Wherein I still can serve you?

LISLE. [*Coming toward her.*] No, I
thank you.

MIRIAM. I have made all ready —
[*Hesitates.*]

LISLE. Every bird doth cower.

MIRIAM. [*Going, but returning.*] I have laid some books within your room — you read

Much — so they say — I thought — how the air faints

As though beneath some suffocating clutch!

LISLE. Darker and darker yet — what books are dear

To you?

MIRIAM. Old histories.

LISLE. That mandolin —

You touch it in the twilight?

MIRIAM. Not with art.

How the air sighed then! Nearer comes the storm;

A moment and 'twill break above our heads.

LISLE. [*Coming close to her.*] Sweet after battle must thy music be.

[*A sudden sound of musketry heard without.*

MIRIAM. What sound was that? That was no thunder-peal.

LISLE. Lieutenant Joyce of this God's army, shot

By my command!

MIRIAM. What crime hath he committed

That you take on you God's prerogative

Of death?

LISLE. How can I name it to you! He

Hath sinned against a maid.

MIRIAM. But such a doom!

LISLE. No doom too harsh! In this our virgin cause

We of that sin must purify us — thus.

[LISLE *bows to* MIRIAM, *who goes off slowly and trembling.* LISLE *starts to follow her, but controls himself with effort. He goes slowly to back, and as he stands looking out, a low mutter of thunder is heard.*

ACT II

ACT II

TIME. — *Three weeks later: night.*

SCENE. — *The same as Act I.* MIRIAM AND MARTHA *discovered,* MIRIAM *touching mandolin absently.* MARTHA *at work on embroidery, a lamp beside her.*

MIRIAM. [*Sings.*]

I

Red skies above a level land
And thoughts of thee;
Sinking sun on reedy strand,
And alder tree.

II

Only the heron sailing home,
With heavy flight:
Ocean afar in silent foam,
And coming night.

III

Dwindling day and drowsing birds,
O my child!
Dimness and returning herds,
Memory wild.

MARTHA. What sorrow of the gloaming dost thou sing?

MIRIAM. Of some bereaved woman in the Fens.

[*Casting aside instrument and coming over to* MARTHA.

O Martha!

MARTHA. Well, child — will you help me here?

These eyes begin to fail in lamp-light now.

MIRIAM. [*Kneeling by her.*] Dear Martha!

MARTHA. Ah! just here I cannot — well,

Weary of music?

MIRIAM. Let me lay my head

Here in thy lap as in the olden days

Then when I was a child.

MARTHA. You'd have me idle

As you are, — there, then!

[*Taking her face in her hands.*

MIRIAM. Was I a bad child,

Martha?

MARTHA. Ah, no! but headlong ever and rash.

MIRIAM. Cruel?

MARTHA. Not with intention.

MIRIAM. Ah, but still
Of others too regardless?

MARTHA. As a child is.

MIRIAM. I am so happy; let me hide my face
Here.

MARTHA. If so happy, child, why so afraid?

MIRIAM. No! not afraid.

MARTHA. I am glad that you are happy,
That shows me you are humbler, that your heart

Is tamed; thence only cometh happiness.

MIRIAM. [*Looking up.*] I am not tamed!

MARTHA. Well — more at rest then.

MIRIAM. Rest!

MARTHA. Now you are weeping. Who shall guess your soul,

Miriam? So happy now, and now wild tears.

MIRIAM. You know, you know, I would not hurt you, no,

Nor — him, not willingly — never was cruel.

MARTHA. You say you would not hurt me nor —

MIRIAM. Your brother.

MARTHA. Your husband.

MIRIAM. No — not willingly — and yet —

MARTHA. What would you say?

MIRIAM. Nothing. I know not what.

[*She again takes up mandolin, then casts it down, coming to* MARTHA *again.*

Martha, dear Martha, why are you not kind?

MARTHA. Kind! you to say I am not kind.

MIRIAM. O, kind —

But — but you love me deeply, do you not?

MARTHA. What need to ask?

MIRIAM. Whate'er I *did*, me, me You love?

MARTHA. I fear so; but you will do nothing

I could not also love.

MIRIAM. I cannot tell.

[*Then suddenly.*] Come, give me both your hands. I hold you fast —

You cannot fly — look not on me. I fear,

I fear to be alone with him — the stranger,

Within our gates — cast me not from you yet!

MARTHA. [*Rising.*] If this be true, it is a deadly sin!

The blackest — to your knees and seek your God.

But I'll not think it, cannot imagine, dream it.

'Tis folly, the fruit of too much idleness.

But hearken, Miriam! though it be but folly,

It must be plucked from out you, flung
away,
Else I will seek my brother out, I am
His faithful friend — but 'tis unthinkable!

Enter MARDYKE, *hurriedly, with a letter in his hand, accompanied by* RATCLIFFE

MARDYKE. [To RATCLIFFE.] Summon the council hither, on the instant!

[*Exit* RATCLIFFE.

[*Turning to* MIRIAM.] Idle — still idle! and in time of war!
A night of peril! yet the strings are heard.
Mistress, bestir you! To your household tasks,

And make this dwelling ready for the night!

And then to bed! else will I lock you up:
Provide you bread to eat, water to drink.
I'll starve this fiend of indolence out of you.

MARTHA. Brother, you speak not wisely.

MARDYKE. Ah, do you
Sustain her?

MARTHA. 'Tis not wise to use her thus;
I tell you, 'tis not wise; such roughness makes
All women desperate.

MARDYKE. Wisdom from women!

MARTHA. You would not have your way with me thus — nor
Will you with her — your wife.

MARDYKE. Leave us together.

[*Exit* MARTHA.

That which I spoke, I spoke it not in jest.

I who have warred, and still do war for God,

Will keep a diligent wife, a quiet house,

Still and severe as fits our sacred cause.

You hear me?

MIRIAM. Sir, you hurt my wrist—forbear.

MARDYKE. Remember! To your duties—then to bed!

[*Exit* MIRIAM.

Meanwhile the officers enter

How long, sirs, must we tarry idle here?

On all sides are we hemmed; where shall we strike?

IRON. Where is Sir Hubert Lisle?

MARDYKE. Shut in his room.

IRON. The peril gathers, yet that vacant chair!

[*Murmurs from officers.*

Sirs, I will speak no treason, yet we marvel
Why thus we are hemmed in idle. I will voice
The general fear; he who should lead us, faints.

[*Murmurs of assent.*

Who captains us? One, dazed and dubious.
Sir Hubert Lisle is fallen into a trance.

What purpose hath he, what direction, torn
This way and that, hither and thither blown?
Now he commands, anon he countermands;
Now is he hot for battle, now he cools,
This man, who fell amidst us like a brand.
And all the night he paces to and fro,
Murmuring and wrestling as with one unseen.
What curse lies heavy on him, or what spell?
Now let him wake, or be some other chosen.

[*Murmurs.*

MARDYKE. Lift we a prayer that heaven restore his mind.

IRON. Yet, while we pray, is Rupert thundering down.

Enter LISLE, *dreamily, with roses in his dress*

LISLE. Forgive, I pray you, sirs, this tardiness.

Sirs, you all frown on me and stare distrust.
I have fallen into a lethargy of spirit
Which even now is passing from me. Friends,
Let me not lose your faith.

MARDYKE. Sir, we but ask
Some guiding from you, and some certain light.

Darker our fortunes grow, on all sides pressed,
And threatened north and west. Where shall we strike?

IRON. I say, take water northward and relieve
Fairfax in Hull.

MARDYKE. Or threaten suddenly
Newark, where now are horsemen swarming thick
Upon our flank.

CRABLOVE. And, sir, still Willoughby
In vain beleaguers Castle Bolingbroke.

MARDYKE. Quick flies the night. Shall we aid Willoughby?
Or hurl a force on Newark, or free Hull?

LISLE. [*Hesitatingly.*] To me it seems
'twere wiser here to bide,
[*Murmurs.*
Holding the Whitton and the Welland line,
Breaking the foe with bog and with morass;
Here let us lie, alert, but not o'er-hot.
We have much need of discipline severe,
Patience and quiet rule and still debate,
Till each man shall attain self-mastery.
Now leave me, sirs; for I must meditate,
And wrestle in spirit lest I be o'ercome.
[*Exeunt officers, sullenly shaking their heads.*

MARDYKE. [*Rising.*] I will go up to the turret-room, and mark

If, in God's book, some chapter or some verse
May give us warning in our present need.

[MARDYKE, *unlocking case, takes down Bible, and ascends to tower with lighted candle.* LISLE *sits plunged in gloomy revery and studying a map distractedly.* MIRIAM *passes across the stage hurriedly, with keys at her girdle.* LISLE, *seeing her, comes forward.*

LISLE. Lady, will you not touch the strings again?
With music lift from me this heaviness?

MIRIAM. I may not, sir. I am accused of sloth,

And must about the business of the house.
Here are my keys.

LISLE. [*Seeing her wrist.*] See, you have hurt your wrist.

MIRIAM. 'Tis nothing.

LISLE. But 'tis bruised as by a blow!
Miriam! — my heart spoke then. This burning silence,
Secret eye lightnings, and deep mutual sighs,
And darting comprehensions of swift thought,
Must break in words at last.

MIRIAM. [*Trembling.*] I will not hear them.

LISLE. Hear them! and then do with me what you will.
When I spurred hither, all on fire for God,

Then did I gallop into human flame.
Cold I had lived, pure, narrow, temperate,
A girded swordsman pressing to the mark.
So rode I through that gate. Then suddenly
Thy beauty like a tempest fell on me;
And in one moment was I rent and riven.
Stunned is my life; I wander, and I grope.
My voice in the council falters; in mid-act
This lifted arm falls at thy floating face.
They waver like to mist the ranks of war,
They waver and fade; he fades, the armèd man,
And spurring armies in a vision clash.
Or would I pray and upward fling my hands?

To thee I pray, thee, thee, with cries beseeching.

I am lost, lost!

MIRIAM. O, I would be to thee

As gentle as the grass above the dead;

And have I been but darkness, and a sword?

LISLE. No! for a revelation breaks from thee.

Thou hast unlocked the loveliness of earth,

Leading me through thy beauty to all beauty.

Thou hast admitted me to mystery,

Taught me the different souls of all the stars;

Through thee have I inherited this air,

Discovered sudden riches at my feet,
And now on eyes long blinded flames the world.
Thou shattering storm, thou eve of after blue,
Thou deluge, and thou world from deluge risen,
Thou sudden death, and thou life after death!

[*A pause while she stands trembling.*

You speak not. Give me but a human word.

MIRIAM. O, all my life has listened for thy step!

LISLE. How have I walked in glory unaware!

O, let your dear soul forth; stay it not now!

MIRIAM. For thee alone came I into this world,

For thee this very hair grew glorious,

My eyes are of this colour for thy sake.

This moment is a deep inheriting,

And as the solemn coming to a kingdom.

LISLE. Apart we two did wander inland; now

Listen, the ocean of infinity!

Life hath no more in it.

MIRIAM. [*Lying in his arms.*] My final peace!

LISLE. Peace?

MIRIAM. Doth the word seem cold?
A woman's peace,
It hath all fire in it, and burneth white.

LISLE. Peace! Is there peace while all —

MIRIAM. Wake me not yet,
Not for this moment!

LISLE. While this dreaming love
Gives you the language of a child or a bird,
Of a light and liquid rapture.

MIRIAM. Speak not yet
Too human and too grave.

LISLE. Yet every way
I look is darkness; for each moment war

May call me off.

MIRIAM. Peer not into the dark.

LISLE. Else will it swallow us. O suddenly

We two must hew us out a path.

MIRIAM. Disturb not

This hush and church of passion with the world!

LISLE. How thy speech wantons, while I stare at life!

MIRIAM. Hush! I am lifted even above hope!

LISLE. He, he—

MIRIAM. Thou hast my spirit, be content.

O, all that in me wanders and is wild

Gathers into one wave that breaks on thee!

LISLE. And I must bide, till this full beauty drop
Which even divinity did flush to dream.
Thou witherest like a virgin at his side.

[*A sudden trumpet. They start apart.*

MIRIAM. Hark!

LISLE. Tidings from the camp!

MIRIAM. I'll leave you, then.

[*Sound of hurried steps.*

LISLE. Some business easily despatched!

MIRIAM. I'll walk
Here, on the terrace, till you shall decide
This petty business.

Enter soldier, with letter, accompanied by FINCH

LISLE. A brief "Yes" or "No."

[*Exit* MIRIAM. LISLE *takes letter and reads it silently.*

Ah!

FINCH. You are stricken, sir; lean on this arm.

LISLE. No! but stand by; this matter presses. Go!

[*Exit soldier and* FINCH.

[*Reading aloud.*

"To SIR HUBERT LISLE, *Commander:*

"The Castle of Bolingbroke still bays all attack. Those whom I have with me are

too few: the breach I have made too slight. Another day and relief bursts upon us from Newark.

"There is no way but by sudden onslaught, and that by daybreak. Who then shall lead this? Whom hast thou in the army of such desperate valour, that, in scorn of life, he will adventure? For he who shall lead such onslaught, may already count himself as dead. Yet, on this hazard, stand our fortunes in this region. Hast thou a man of such fiery zeal that others follow him? Then, send him quickly. Let him know what peril awaits him; but yet that on his peril hang our hopes.

"Knowing well thine own spirit, I entreat that thou thyself shalt not so adventure; for thy life is of the worth of many cities. Speed! Speed!

"WILLOUGHBY."

[LISLE *sits down and spreads letter before him under lamp.*

And why should I not send — him?
He is ripe
With such experience as none other hath
In breaches and in onslaughts both in France
And in the foreign fenland; he, I say,
Of all the host is the one only man,
The apparent instrument. I do but send

Him whom the peril asks, by man unblamed.
With God how stand I? Vain to palter there.
I'd have the husband dead that I might clasp
The wife secure. If then behind the deed
The mind can murder, and the heart can kill;
Then this mere silent wish, born of the brain,
Might instantly start up a living thing
And able, without hands, to strike?
What were I better than the lurking thief,
Or hired assassin stealing from behind,

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To stab him in the back? He shall not go.
Let him succumb to the slow hour, or drop
By sudden death-shot in mid-battle, or sink
In casual fever — I'll not do this thing.
Rather myself will go; leave pure this house,
And hurl this lurèd soul upon the breach.

[*He starts to go when* MIRIAM *enters softly, behind, from moonlit terrace.*

MIRIAM. Hast thou despatched?

LISLE. Ah, thou?

MIRIAM. Hast thou not yet Determined?

LISLE. [*Hesitating as he gazes at her.*]

No, not yet; there's more in this
Than I had looked for.

MIRIAM. [*Stretching out her arms for letter.*]

May I read it? Oft,
A woman's mind is lightning, where men grope.

[LISLE *refuses to give letter to her.*

So weighty is it?

LISLE. Even with life and death.
Nay, more: who knows? with all eternity.

MIRIAM. [*Quickly.*] Not perilous to thee?

LISLE. Perhaps! Away!
Thy moonlight loveliness disturbs me.

MIRIAM. Words
To make me stay; but, yet, I will not. I

Am heavy with the treasure thou hast
given me,
And I will steal within and spread it out.
I long to lock me in and be alone
With these new riches in the dimness.

LISLE. Ah!
Come back.

MIRIAM. [*Laughing softly.*] I shall disturb
thee.

LISLE. Yet stay on.
Can you not hear Time rushing past our
ears,
With audible, irreparable flight?

MIRIAM. [*Gazing outward and sighing.*]
How e'en the Fenland hath grown fairyland
And all these levels gleam as passionate

As the high gardens of Assyrian kings.
I shall not sleep — I cannot tell thee why —

[*Leaning toward him.*

Oh, thou dost know! Good night!

LISLE. Thou shalt not go.
Thy hair hath slipped, and showers round thee. Now,
I hold thee all dishevelled in the moon;
I cannot clasp thy spirit; thee, I ask,
Thus in thy glorious body — thee!

MIRIAM. I tremble.

LISLE. That smile hath made a mist of all the world.

MIRIAM. [*Starting from him.*] Listen, one cometh on us.

LISLE. Who?

MIRIAM. Alas!

[*Rushes from him.*

LISLE. [*Coming wildly down from terrace into the room, sees the letter and snatches it up. Steps are heard, and* MARDYKE *is seen slowly descending the stairs. Meanwhile the moon is clouded, and a light rain begins to fall.*] Old man, within this moment hast thou died.

Enter MARDYKE, *with Bible, which he lays on table.*

MARDYKE. It seemed, a while since, that a trumpet blew;
Still, by the book I sat; but have not found

Chapter or verse that lights our present need.

What tidings from the camp, what sudden word?

LISLE. Prepare to spur at once to Bolingbroke.

MARDYKE. Now on the instant?

LISLE. On the instant. Thou Art needed there. Grave conference is held.

Thy famed experience in foreign siege
The general asks. Thee only can I send.

MARDYKE. The moon is quenched; yet lighten Thou this dark.

Thou great Taskmaster, if unto Thy service
Me Thou hast called, I go and murmur not.

LISLE. Arm thee and quickly, ere the blinded dawn
Peer on the drizzling levels. Fast! Away!

MARDYKE. With joy I go. I thank Thee, O my Lord,
That Thou hast not discarded me as old,
A cumberer of the ground, a loppèd branch,
But Thou hast service still for these grey hairs.
Light though the task, I'll kindle it with fire.
Restore to these old bones and crampèd limbs
Speed and the ancient strength of other days

Then when I battled and bled at La Rochelle.

Ratcliffe! at once my armour, and my horse.

[*Exit* MARDYKE.

LISLE. [*Taking pen and writing.*] "I send you the man fitted for our purpose; of mighty zeal and valour, and one that can enkindle others to a hazard. Let him, then, lead this assault. He knoweth his own peril and wherefore he is sent. He himself beareth this letter. He bringeth his life in his hand. Send me swift news of the assault — and of him."

[*Voices are heard, and the sound of running to and fro. Reënter*

MARDYKE, *half-armed, with* RATCLIFFE, *who hastily helps him to finish his arming.*

MARDYKE. [*To* RATCLIFFE.] Buckle me closer there; and, here, more room.

RATCLIFFE. Thy back lies open here!

MARDYKE. In such a cause
I fear no stab in the back; the front is all.

LISLE. Here is a letter: into Willoughby's hand
Deliver it.

MARDYKE. Shall I be long from home?

LISLE. I think not — till to-morrow at sunset.

Reënter MIRIAM *from the other side*

MIRIAM. Whither so suddenly, in the dead night?

LISLE. Your husband summoned to the camp, straightway.

MARDYKE. Our officers hold conference; no more,

My voice is needed; prattle not — to bed!

Woman hath no concern in this.

MIRIAM. But when

Shall you return?

MARDYKE. To-morrow, by sunset.

[LISLE *goes out on terrace.* MIRIAM *watches* MARDYKE *finishing his arming.*

My sword, now!

Enter SERVANT, *hurriedly*

SERVANT. Sir, the horse stands.

MIRIAM. [*To* MARDYKE, *who goes to the door.*] Sir, good-night!

MARDYKE. There, then — [*Kisses her on forehead.*] Such joy have I in buckling me
Again in armour, all things I forget;
Suddenly wife and home are gone from me.

[MIRIAM *goes from him to the door.*

Good-night, Sir Hubert. Peace be on this house!

LISLE. [*Coming down.*] Sir, shall I go in place of thee? 'Tis not
Too late!

MARDYKE. Have I not prayed? The Lord hath chosen.

[*Exit* MARDYKE *with* RATCLIFFE. LISLE *goes out on terrace — sound of hoofs galloping away into the night. A cold glimmer of dawn appears far off.*

MIRIAM. When doth the conference end?

LISLE. To-morrow!

MIRIAM. Then,
A little while is ours. So cold? But now —

LISLE. A moment, Miriam! I must think alone.
I am sore troubled.

MIRIAM. Kiss me — I will go.

[LISLE *makes movement as though to embrace her, but cannot.*

Am I despised, then, that I could not hide
What burned in me? I should have fenced and fenced
And so had reverence — you despise me?

LISLE. Ah!
The starkness of the dawn is at my heart.

MIRIAM. O, how I scorn myself — and yet — [*Putting her hand on his shoulder and looking in his face.*] Good-night!

[*Exit* MIRIAM.

LISLE. I ne'er did love thee so as at this moment.

As he turns, enter RATCLIFFE

Who's there?

RATCLIFFE. I, sir.

LISLE. Well, well?

RATCLIFFE. The holy Book!
I come to lock it safe. Each night it is
My master's custom. Or, I'll leave it thus;
If haply you would seek in it some verse
To light our present trouble.

LISLE. Leave it, then!

[*Exit* RATCLIFFE. *A sallow gleam of dawn falls on the Book, as* LISLE *opens and reads; and the sound of galloping hoofs is borne back once more on the wind.*

"And it came to pass in the morning,

that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. And he wrote in the letter, saying, Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.

"And the men of the city went out and fought with Joab: and there fell some of the people of the servants of David; and Uriah the Hittite died also."

[*A faint sound of galloping hoofs is again heard, and then ceases.*

ACT III

ACT III

TIME. — *Five years later.*

SCENE. — *A room in a house on the outskirts of the town of Wakefield. At back a window looks out on the open country. On its right a door communicates with the outer courtyard; on the left another opens into the sleeping rooms of the house.* LISLE *discovered, seated, with papers before him; on one side* RATCLIFFE, *on the other two officers in attendance.*

LISLE. Old Ratcliffe, ask my wife to
come to me.
Stay! She was hushing up the child to
sleep,
Low singing over him; say will she come
If he is sleeping now.

[*Exit* RATCLIFFE.

Sirs, we have seen
Three years of seeming peace; yet here I
hold
Letters in Fairfax' hand; he apprehends
In Kent and Essex disaffection; speaks
Of imminent trouble. What of Wakefield
then
And all this region; see you any cause
Here for disquiet?

OFFICER. None, sir, save from bands
Roaming in indolent undiscipline,
Hither and thither, plundering purposeless.

LISLE. No smouldering mischief then?

OFFICER. None visible.

Enter MIRIAM *with child. Officers retire*

MIRIAM. Hubert — he will not sleep,
but must put on
His sword and strut with it. Ah! let
him stay.

LISLE. Well — well! thy sword already
girded on,
Yet, sir, they tell me that no peril
threatens.
[*To* MIRIAM.] How straight he stands!
His colour too not bright

Nor dull; but with a blander glow of blood.

I think that he hath more of me than thee.

MIRIAM. No, Hubert, no.

LISLE. His eyes! Those are my eyes.

MIRIAM. Only in colour! but that way they ope

Wide at the world, that is all mine.

LISLE. Perhaps.

MIRIAM. Then, too, his mouth?

LISLE. Mine, mine in every curve.

MIRIAM. If you had watched him smile as close as I

You would not say that; all his smile is mine.

I grant that when he frets, his mouth will
drop
Like to his father's.

LISLE. So! from thee his joy,
From me his sadness.

MIRIAM. Hubert, no! when he
Doth sadden, that same dimness o'er him
comes
As upon me.

LISLE. Will you claim all of him?
His eyes, his mouth, his sad hour and his
bright?
His hair, now, see that curl behind the
ear.
Come, you must yield me that.

MIRIAM. O, that perhaps.

LISLE. Will you not leave me any part in him?

MIRIAM. Oh, yes! his cry when he would fight off sleep.

LISLE. [*Laughing.*] Well, well, sweet, we will quarrel over him
No longer; he is fair and strong and bright.
How his young face hath mellowed our first passion,
What flamed then is a glow more beautiful.
Yet is thy love of me not less?

MIRIAM. How — less?

LISLE. The former fury hath gone out of it,
The pulsing life, the blinding dance of blood.

MIRIAM. The child hath brought a tremble into it.

I am grown fearful for the sake of him;

I dread the rustle of angels in his room.

LISLE. And now doth he divide what once was mine

Wholly.

MIRIAM. Ah, no! he hath enriched that love.

Once did it live upon thy look, thy voice,

Thy strength, thy courage, and thy conqueror soul,

This was enough, God knows. But, Hubert, now

We two together to behold our boy,

That we have reared and planted sunward,
grow,
While all our sighs like breezes come to
him,
And all our tears fall down on him like
rain.
I thought thou never couldst be more to
me;
But now is added to that rapturous fire
Much that perhaps of men is not esteemed,
But to a woman meaneth half her life.
To hold our sweet night council o'er his
day,
To exchange bright understandings silently
At little words of his; to bend, we two
Over him dreaming while thy hand on mine

Tightens a moment; then to watch together
Some little way of thee or me appear
Sudden in him; to feel our daily life
Grow solemn at his voice: to see our spirits,
Close though they met in kiss and breathèd word,
Visibly here commingled and made flesh.

LISLE. Now blows the future sweet into our eyes,
And even peril treadeth upon grass.

Enter RATCLIFFE

RATCLIFFE. A sudden messenger from Pomfret ridden!

Enter messenger, hurriedly

MESSENGER. Sir, all the country around
Pomfret walls
Is risen up; the castle is cut off:
We foraging without, found no return.
They signal for relief; and one even now
Behind me rideth furiously, I fear
Bringing worse news.

LISLE. [*To* RATCLIFFE.] Bid Arlington
prepare
With all our horsemen instantly to spur
To Pomfret; then if he who rides behind
Bear us worse tidings, I myself will lead.

[*Exit* RATCLIFFE *with messenger.*

MIRIAM. [*To child, who falls back on her shoulder.*] Ah, darling!

LISLE. How, what ails the child?

MIRIAM. There, there,
Is thy head heavy? On my bosom then.

LISLE. Now, Hubert, little Hubert, draw thy sword!

[*Child attempts, but fails to draw sword.*

See thus! [*Drawing his own.*] Not even a smile! Why he would laugh
And leap at this an hour since.

MIRIAM. He is heavy.
Hush! do not speak to him.

LISLE. [*Bending over him.*] What dreams I have
For thee.

MIRIAM. What dost thou dream?

LISLE. He shall be tall.

MIRIAM. No taller than thyself.

LISLE. I'd have him shoot
Beyond me both in inches and in deeds.

MIRIAM. A soldier?

LISLE. No! when he shall grow a man
The land will cry for rest. I see him then
A healer and a closer up of wounds.
His task shall be to obliterate and soothe;
To bind, not break; to mingle, not to mar;
His counsel breathing on our England balm.
This labour more than battle asks a man.

MIRIAM. It is a noble dream.

LISLE. And shall come true.
Or he shall build in new lands over sea
Some virgin commonwealth.

RATCLIFFE. [*Entering hastily.*] A horseman, sir,

Spurred sweating to the gate.

LISLE. Summon him in!

Enter soldier, breathlessly

SOLDIER. From Pomfret, sir, where we are hard beset.

The town may fall each moment, totters now;

And only in the sight of thee is hope.

LISLE. [*To* MIRIAM.] Dear, I must go.

[*To soldier.*] Tell Colonel Arlington

That I myself will lead; let all stand by.

Ratcliffe, a breastplate and a helm enough!

[RATCLIFFE *hastily arms him.*

Old man, why do thy fingers fumble thus,

Or have thine eyes dimmed suddenly? Apace!

RATCLIFFE. O, sir, this very night-time, five years flown,

Thus armed I my old master, when he fell By Castle Bolingbroke.

LISLE. This very night?

RATCLIFFE. This night; when I did leave the holy Book

Unlocked for you to search it.

LISLE. I remember.

RATCLIFFE. Again the night is here! My fingers fumble

About the straps as then. Pray God this night

May not see dawn like that!

LISLE. Leave me — enough.

[*Exit* RATCLIFFE.

[*Aside.*] I sent him then! Now I myself must go.

MIRIAM. [*To child, with whom she is walking to and fro.*] Now thou art hot, now cold.

LISLE. Art thou, dead man,
Urging me down that road where thee I sped?

MIRIAM. [*Bringing child to* LISLE.] Hubert, his face!

LISLE. [*Suddenly, gazing on child.*] Or, or — give me the child.

MIRIAM. What's this?

LISLE. [*To child.*] Close, close, your arms about my neck.

No peril visible or invisible
Shall touch you so enfolded.

MIRIAM. Why so fearful —
So on a sudden?

LISLE. Is our son watch'd o'er?
Guarded each instant?

MIRIAM. Hubert!

LISLE. Wife, I speak not
Of common perils, but — of the approach
Of malice superhuman. Ah! forgive me.
There came a little cloud upon my brain.
Take him within; summon the doctor straight.
He is ever within call. Then send him here

That I may speak with him.

[*Kissing child and looking after them.*

[*Exit* MIRIAM *with child.*

Why on this night
Doth the child sicken suddenly? Ah, folly!
Childhood is quickly sick and quickly well.

[*A pause.*

Or do the dead remember still? Perhaps
The spirit of the murdered fresh in wrath
Leaps out upon his murderer, but in vain,
Baffled by loss of corporal faculty.
May he not then a spirit vengeance seek,
A vengeance not of hands, and learn to blight
And cripple; and perhaps the matin chill

Can use, and all the fatal airs of night,
And can direct the wandering malady
Whither he will? If he then whom I slew
Is aiming in such vengeance at the child?
Wilt thou revenge thee on bright curls and cheeks,
And wilt thou lunge, grey swordsman, at a babe?

Enter doctor, from within

Now, doctor, now! How is't with him?

DOCTOR. He lies
In some mysterious languor, and my art
Reaches him not.

LISLE. Is then the malady
To human healers new?

DOCTOR. To me at least.

REV T. CALLAGHAN

LISLE. Is it not written in thy category?

DOCTOR. I cannot reach the seat and fount of it.

LISLE. Stands it not on the list, the cause, the cure?

DOCTOR. Show me the cause; then will I find the cure.

LISLE. What symptom hath he? Or what certain sign?

DOCTOR. No spot hath he, nor fever rash; yet fever.

LISLE. Doth he cry out? or lies he silent still?

DOCTOR. He makes no cry, yet struggles as he lies.

LISLE. With what doth the child struggle, how beset?

DOCTOR. He seems to fend a something from his throat.

LISLE. [*With a cry.*] Thou dead man, take thy fingers from his throat;

He is a young thing and a little — ah!

Back to him, doctor, linger not — yet stay;

Think you that heaven doth ever intervene

With special sickness, and for some rank fault

In us, doth strike us there where most we love?

DOCTOR. 'Tis our presumption to imagine it.

We fancy those regardless-rolling orbs,

Themselves inhabited, tremendous worlds,
Night-lights to reassure us in the dark.
We colour with our trespasses the eclipse,
And hear paternal anger in the storm;
Impute to sickness wrath, vengeance to death,
And memory to unrecording Nature.

LISLE. Perhaps — back to his bed.

DOCTOR. What man can do
I'll do.

[*Exit doctor.*

LISLE. [*With uplifted hands.*] O,
Thou that sittest in Thy heavens,
Mine was the sin; be mine the punishment,
But let him live. End me with lightning, or

In fever let me burn down to the grave,
But let him live. Make ashes of my life,
Take from me every hope — but let him live!
Strike here, here, and not otherwhere! Or if
I may not look for mercy, yet must she,
Who of that murder goeth innocent,
Walk with me hand in hand into this fire?
By our two souls that anchor on his life,
O, wilt Thou smite where all is holiest,
Smite at the very fount of hope and faith,
And wring the spirit for the fault of flesh?

Or if with mine her doom entangled be,
What hath he done that he must pay the price?
What crime committed save the being born?
Then must my sin cancel for him the light,
Put out the recent sunbeam, and make blank
The murmurs and the splendours of the world?
O Father, by that hour, when Thou wast dimmed
To human in the clouds on Calvary! —

Enter soldier, suddenly

I come, but to a phantom conflict there;

I leave behind the real battle here.

[*Exit* LISLE.

[*After a pause,* RATCLIFFE *slowly enters and puts out the lights one by one, and goes out, leaving the stage in complete darkness. After a pause a female figure is seen issuing from the door on the left, who goes over to the window at the back, and, withdrawing slowly the curtain, the glimmer of dawn is seen. She stands a moment gazing outward; a single sigh of wind is heard. Enter* RATCLIFFE, *wearily, from the door on the right. He is about to cross the*

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room when the woman stops him with finger on her lip and points to door of sleeping room. RATCLIFFE *retires, bowing his head. As the woman crosses back to the door on the left, she is met by a nurse, who with whispers gives her an empty phial. The woman goes out with this by the door on the right, the nurse remaining at the other door, and listening. She then starts and hurries inward. The woman returns with the phial and is met by the doctor, issuing from door on left. He has a glass, and, holding the phial to the light, pours*

some of it out carefully, drop by glimmering drop. Meanwhile the room is growing gradually lighter and more light. The nurse now quickly emerges, touching the doctor and motioning within. She and the doctor retire within, the woman standing beside the door motionless. Reënter RATCLIFFE *hastily and stealthily; he draws the woman into the middle of the room and points to window, while a noise of hoofs is heard approaching and ceases outside. A soldier now enters hurriedly, but, about to speak, is motioned to silence by* RATCLIFFE

and the woman. RATCLIFFE *takes soldier down.*

RATCLIFFE. Your news? But soft, in whisper.

SOLDIER. Victory!

Pomfret relieved! — Sir Hubert from hot fight

Returning — well-nigh home — already. Listen.

[*Far off is heard the sound of the Puritan hymn of victory. It grows louder and louder. There is a sound of commotion without, and enter* LISLE, *casting aside his armour as he comes, followed by certain captains.*

LISLE. How is it with the child?

[*The woman and* RATCLIFFE *motion him to silence.*

WOMAN. Hush, sir, be still.
The moment is approaching and the struggle.

LISLE. Let me go in to him. Hold me not back.

[*He rushes to door, but is met by nurse, with finger on lip. She stands before the door.*

NURSE. Hist! do not now disturb him.
Now is come
The moment when he wakes or sleeps for ever.

[LISLE *signs to officers to withdraw, which they do in silence with bowed heads, and stealthily followed by* RATCLIFFE. *The nurse and woman retire within, silently.* LISLE, *left alone, goes to window at back, and, holding up his hands, causes the chanting of the soldiers, which has come nearer and nearer, to subside and cease. He comes down to the door and stands by it, breathing heavily.*

LISLE. God! God!

Reënter doctor, who stands with bowed head at door, unnoticed at first by LISLE, *who at length sees him*

The child is dead?

DOCTOR. The child is dead.

[*Exit back into room.*

LISLE. The sin of David mine, and mine the doom!

Would I had found the death I sought with passion,

There in the storm of swords round Pomfret keep!

Yet she — 'tis she whom now I must remember;

She is alone with him and makes no cry.

No! she is very silent: most she needs

My arm supporting, and upholding words.

With her must I abide, lift, and sustain her.

Enter MIRIAM. *She stands alone by the door.*

MIRIAM. What have I done, that God hath taken my child?

LISLE. [*Hesitatingly and tenderly.*] How should thy deed bereave him of his breath?

MIRIAM. [*Slowly recognising* LISLE.] And thou! thou wast his father, wast thou not?

LISLE. And am thy husband upon whom to lean.

MIRIAM. How have I sinned? I do not understand.

LISLE. O, Miriam —

MIRIAM. Wherefore was he dangled bright
Before my eyes a moment — then withdrawn?

He had just learned to run alone; and I
Had taught him a few words — and he is gone.

LISLE. How can I help you but a little, tell me?

MIRIAM. The causeless theft! I say it were relief
To feel that here I paid for some far sin.
Sooner heaven's ire than heaven's indifference!
O, Hubert, yes — on me this doom has fallen.

LISLE. On thee! Why thee?

MIRIAM. I rushed into thy arms
In headlong passion and in frenzied blood,

And recked not of my husband, nor of law.

This is my punishment!

LISLE. Why charge thyself?

Shall we accuse us of the frozen bird,

Plead guilty to the fallen buds of spring?

MIRIAM. That bud was mine; and I have cankered it:

And though my boy came from me without spot,

And though his body from the scythe of Death

Lieth as sweet as mown grass in the even,

Yet on his soul were deep transmitted stains,

And tell tale scars, to spirits visible.

LISLE. Peace!

MIRIAM. I am held unworthy, as who should say —

"She is unclean: ah, trust her not with babes."

Sir, I was no fit mother for your child.

LISLE. Miriam!

MIRIAM. A mother? No! not even a nurse.

I had known too much to dare undress thy babe.

Where lived I ere I came into your service?

Had you made close enquiry — you had straight

Discharged me.

LISLE. Wife!

MIRIAM. Yet there where he is gone,
There's none so pure could tend on him
as I,
So brood above his opening eyes at dawn.
When was I wanting found? When, for
one instant?
When was I caught a sentinel asleep?
What flash of absence, lightning of repose,
Is urged against me? Why, I did behold
And hear the coming hours approach like
foes,
The night a thief, the stars with poised
spears,
The sun like an incendiary rushed.

LISLE. Belovèd!

MIRIAM. Yet that madness all outweighs;
In blind blood have I sinned, and he is struck.
And you! I have made you suffer! You'll not speak.
Yet the gripped hand, the soldier-silence tell.
Mercy, mercy, my lord!

[*She casts herself at his feet.*

LISLE. In mercy rise!
Cling not about my feet! Loose you my knees!
I will not see you suffer or abased!
Shudder away from me! Mine was the sin.
I, I alone have brought this vengeance down.

LAND,

MIRIAM. Ah!

LISLE. He that *was* your husband —

MIRIAM. What of him?

LISLE. Fell in the wild assault of Bolingbroke.

MIRIAM. Yes, yes!

LISLE. Yet died he by no accident.

MIRIAM. Hubert, this is all dark!

LISLE. Whoe'er should lead
That desperate onslaught, he must surely die.
I sent your husband.

MIRIAM. Knowing this?

LISLE. Because
I knew it. I'll not spare myself; I'll bare
This traitor heart unto your eyes at last.
I am no common murderer, Miriam.

I slew not in the open, nor in haste,
Nor wracked with jealousy: I trapped
him to it,
Beguiled him with some common con-
ference,
Then wrote a letter marking him for
death,
And watched him ride, dying, into the
night.

MIRIAM. Therefore wast thou so cold,
and could'st not kiss me.
Away!

LISLE. He stood between us.

MIRIAM. Touch me not!

LISLE. The path to you across his body
lay.

MIRIAM. Blood is upon you!

LISLE. Yet — yet!

MIRIAM. Not his blood,

O murderer!

LISLE. And if murderer I be,

Then for thy sake am I a murderer.

MIRIAM. No! not of him.

LISLE. Of whom then?

MIRIAM. Of my child.

LISLE. That which I did, I did with reeling sense!

I see the moon still on thy tumbled hair,

That smile that made a mist of the great world.

MIRIAM. O will you dare to make me your accomplice?

'Twas I that set you on, I beckoned you?

LISLE. No! but thy moonlit beauty maddened me.

MIRIAM. Ah! will you speak of beauty at this moment?

This beauty! and my boy so close and cold,
I sicken through all my body. Then these eyes
That still shine, and these lips that dare to speak,
This bosom, very snow from hills of Hell,
This flesh which still I wear, whispered you on?
This body was the bait then and the lure

That woo'd you to that murder — and, my God,

This — this conceived my darling! Dead is he?

When was he ever otherwise than dead?

As soon as quickened, sentenced, judged already,

Long, long ere he was born.

LISLE. I, I alone

Am stained.

MIRIAM. [*In frenzy.*] I'll mar this body — loose your hold.

Grasp not my wrists — this poison-tree I'll cleave.

LISLE. On me thy fury! Me! Here is thy aim!

I only have sinned!

MIRIAM. [*With gradual calm.*] Yet this did lure thee on.

Now on the wild night-festival of sense
The spirit morning dawneth — or is't perhaps
Merely the drunkard's morning penitence —
A misery matutinal? All our marriage
Had from the first this taint on it. No more
We'll meet, nor ever touch hands, nor for a moment
Glance in each other's eyes, for here I see
God's finger fallen.
[*With a certain weary sweetness.*] Hubert — it is past,

My wrath with thee — but let us fly each other.

Between, an angel stands with flaming sword,

And at his feet the body of our babe.

Quickly! Apart! Let water roll between us!

Away, like those first parents out of Eden!

Fiery behind us gates of Paradise!

LISLE. Yet was her hand in his for all the wrath.

Still, still you love me? Tell me this at least!

MIRIAM. Yes! but our love is as a thing accursed.

LISLE. Woman, I grope to find you, but I cannot.

O, is there no way to you, and no path,
No winding path?

MIRIAM. No way for thee to me.

LISLE. Dear, have I lost you utterly?

MIRIAM. For ever!

LISLE. God, can thy sea divide as does
this sea,
O God, what is Thy severing grave to
this?

[*A pause; then, approaching her wistfully.*]

The child did you resemble in his smile,
Yet me about the brow a little.

MIRIAM. Hush!

LISLE. Leave me not utter darkness,
give me some
Gleam of a far-off meeting ere we die,

Somewhere at last, at last in a strange land,

Or shingle at the ending of the world!

MIRIAM. I am utterly a-cold and without hope.

I would creep in beside the dead for warmth.

LISLE. Being so cold, love, whither will you wander?

MIRIAM. Away! to live with all dumb things that yearn.

I'll nest with thee, thou mother bird returned,

I feel thy dreadful circlings in my blood.

I'll be the friend of the robbed lioness;

Above me, lo! the unhindered desert moon!

O I am stone to human life henceforth!
Yet, if I feel, I feel we two must part.

LISLE. [*After a struggle.*] Come, then.
Good-by. Give me your hand once.

MIRIAM. [*Turning and seeing him.*] Ah!
Why did you turn *his* eyes upon me
then?
I cannot go for a moment.

LISLE. [*Coming close to her.*] Why at
all?
Miriam, it seems that now for the first
time
We two are joined together, man and
wife.
[*She makes to go.*] No, listen! Then go
from me if you will.

Our former marriage, though by holy bell
And melody of lifted voices blest,
Was yet in madness of the blood conceived,
And born of murder: therefore is the child
Withdrawn, that we might feel the sting of flesh
Corruptible; yet he in that withdrawal,
Folded upon the bosom of the Father,
Hath joined us in a marriage everlasting;
[*She raises her head.*] Marriage at last of spirit, not of sense,
Whose ritual is memory and repentance,
Whose sacrament this deep and mutual wound,

Whose covenant the all that might have been.

[*Solemnly.*] And to this troth majestic shadows throng,

And stand about us in dumb sympathy.

In presence of these silent witnesses,

And one perchance that carrieth now a babe,

I take in mine thy hand and call thee wife —

Wife, wife, till the grave-shattering trumpet!

MIRIAM. Yet

I want the little hands and feet of him.

LISLE. Dear, in a deeper union are we bound

Than by the earthly touch of him, or voice

Human, or little laughters in the sun.

We by bereavement henceforth are betrothed,

Folded by aspirations unfulfilled,

And clasped by irrecoverable dreams:

[*She falls with a cry on his heart, where he holds her fast.*]

Last, by one hope more deep than certainty,

That though the child shall not return to us,

Yet shall we two together go to him.

MIRIAM. [*Slowly taking his hand to lead him.*] Will you come in with me and look at him?

[*Exeunt slowly, with bowed heads.*

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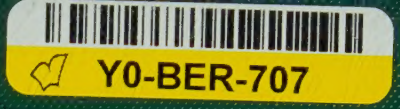
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